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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001133

NOFORN
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DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO
ALSO FOR IO A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK
P FOR HMUSTAPHA AND RRANGASWAMY
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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF GENERAL DAVID
PETRAEUS

REF: A. BEIRUT 1112
[B](#). BEIRUT 1104
[C](#). BAGHDAD 2298

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) General Petraeus, Welcome to Lebanon. Your visit provides another excellent opportunity to reinforce our message of strong, continued U.S. government support for a sovereign, independent, and democratic Lebanon. Your visit continues a series of high-level USG contacts since President Sleiman was elected on May 25, including Secretary Rice, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman, Assistant Secretary of Defense Mary Beth Long, CENTCOM J5 Policy and Planning Director Major General Allardice, CODEL Rahall, and State's Director of Policy Planning David Gordon. President Bush has invited President Michel Sleiman to visit Washington, a trip that is expected to occur on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September.

POLITICAL OVERVIEW

[1](#)2. (C) There have been significant political developments since May 2008, when the government's decision to dismantle Hizballah's communications systems and remove the chief of airport security sparked armed clashes between Hizballah and Lebanese civilians. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) did little to intervene, leading many to question the LAF's effectiveness. The Qatari-brokered "Doha Agreement" of May 21 ended the political impasse and paved the way for the May 25 election of consensus candidate and former Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president. After much wrangling between the majority and opposition, Sleiman asked PM Siniora to form a national unity government on July 11, composed, as per the Doha Agreement, of 16 majority ministers, 11 from the opposition (the so-called "blocking third"), and three for President Sleiman.

[1](#)3. (C) The new cabinet currently is close to completing its "ministerial statement" to parliament outlining the government's program, which parliament must approve. Hizballah's arms and the role of the "resistance", code for Hizballah, remain the key sticking points. Predictions are

that the ministerial committee drafting the statement will agree on August 1, with final approval by parliament a week later. Should these issues not be addressed in the ministerial statement, they probably will be referred to the National Dialogue process that President Sleiman pledged to convene as part of the Doha Agreement.

SPORADIC VIOLENCE
IN THE NORTH

14. (C) There is speculation that the disagreements over the ministerial statement and efforts to pressure the Siniora government are the cause of recent clashes in the Tripoli area in north Lebanon (Ref B). The LAF did not initially perform well after deploying to Tripoli, but now appears to have the situation under control. However, the security situation in Tripoli remains tense.

2009 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

15. (C) The May 2009 parliamentary elections will be pivotal in shaping the country's direction. The majority March 14 coalition is still formulating its message for the elections, while the Hizballah-led opposition, in its typical, disciplined fashion, is further along in its election strategy. With the outcome of Shia- and Sunni-dominated districts predictable, all parties view winning the Christian vote in key districts as important to the determination of which side will get the parliamentary majority. The Shia

BEIRUT 00001133 002 OF 002

vote is almost entirely with Hizballah and its allies in the opposition. The Sunni vote is almost entirely with Saad Hariri and the current "March 14" majority. The Christian vote is split between the two.

HARIRI'S VISIT TO IRAQ: MOVING
THE LEBANESE CLOSER TO NAJAF

16. (C) As you are aware, Saad Hariri, son of assassinated former PM Rafik Hariri and leader of the majority March 14 coalition, visited Iraq on July 17 (Ref C). Saad called his trip "very good" in that it shocked Hizballah and improved his relationship with the Lebanese Shia (Ref A). He explained his purpose was to show that the Iraqi Shia are Arabs and not Iranians. Another goal was to reinforce the position of the holy city of Najaf to counter the Iranian influence represented by Qom. Hariri plans to facilitate future visits to Iraq by Lebanese Shia students to deepen the relationship with Najaf. In his view, Iraq is moving "away from an Iranian agenda," which he predicted would have a "tremendous" impact on Lebanon. Hariri's trip to Iraq generated positive reactions in Lebanon and improved his standing in the eyes of independent Lebanese Shia because of his meeting with Ayatollah Sistani, which lessened perceptions many Lebanese Shia have that he is "an American agent."

U.S. SECURITY ASSISTANCE

17. (S/NF) Despite recent disappointing performances in Beirut and Tripoli, the LAF performed surprisingly well in 2007 to defeat Islamic extremists in the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian refugee camp, in part thanks to expedited U.S. assistance. The U.S. is providing the LAF a robust military package of equipment and training (over \$410 million out of a total U.S. assistance package of over \$1 billion since the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war). Nevertheless, PM Siniora and Hariri continue to stress the need for upgraded assistance and accelerating existing programs. Hariri, in particular, repeatedly raises the need for attack helicopters, most recently with Secretary Rice and Eric Edelman, stressing that

attack helicopters would have enabled the LAF to defeat Fatah al-Islam extremists in Nahr al-Barid more quickly and to stand up to Hizballah in May. U/S Edelman is working on options to present to Defense Minister Elias Murr. PM Siniora has also complained of the slowness with which requests for USG-security assistance are processed.

RELATIONS WITH SYRIA

18. (C) President Sleiman met his Syrian counterpart, Bashar Asad, in Paris on the sidelines of the Union for the Mediterranean meeting in July. Following their meeting, Sleiman accepted Asad's invitation to visit Damascus and has told us he will go soon after the cabinet finishes work on the ministerial statement. Syria has said it wants to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon and is willing to discuss issues such as border demarcation and the status of Lebanese citizens detained in Syria. However, many Lebanese observers believe Syria will slow-roll the process of exchanging embassies and is only paying lip service to Lebanese sovereignty. Our March 14 contacts continuously stress the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon as the only "big stick" capable of thwarting Syrian interference, and criticize what they view as slow progress in establishing the Tribunal.

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